

**Appropriations Committee
Human Services Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services)**

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Jennifer Fiorillo and I am the CEO of Bridges Healthcare in Milford, CT. Our agency provides vital mental health, substance abuse and wrap around services to adults, families and children in Milford, Orange, West Haven and surrounding towns. We serve more than 2,000 individuals annually through direct treatment, support and recovery services. I wish to express my deep concern for the future of our agency and other non-profit community providers who are struggling to provide sustainable safety net services to underserved populations.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I am asking you to honor the long-term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and fund services by \$461 million over five years – or an additional 8% in Fiscal Year 2023.

Without this funding we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system, which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities. At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

Our agency relies on licensed clinical social workers and professional counselors to provide clinical treatment to our clients. For many years we have not been able to pay a competitive salary for these positions in our market, but have been fortunate to have new and experienced staff stay employed with Bridges, despite the lower wage. In the last year we have experienced a mass exodus of this critical position in our agency to private practice and other settings that can pay 15-20% more than what our agency is able to offer. We have had to increase salaries for these positions across the agency to retain and recruit new clinical staff, and we still cannot fill these positions. We have also offered sign-on bonuses which have been a minimally effective recruitment strategy.

Human services are now in competition for staff with companies like Amazon and Walmart that require no specialized training, are paying more and offering more hiring incentives. Across the state, The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are vacant right now. Prospective employees are demanding not only higher wages, but also educational incentives and other new benefits that are not feasible for a community non-profit.

Our agency is struggling with a vacancy rate of 10-12%, which means as many as 20 or more positions are open at one time. Most of these positions are for clinical staff and case management that require managing a caseload of clients. As we continue to lose direct care staff, we rely on existing staff to take

on a high volume of cases until these positions can be filled. This directly impacts the quality of care we are providing and leads to burn out among our most loyal and committed staff.

We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for \$461 million with an 8% additional increase this fiscal year. This increase will allow agencies like ours to pay more competitive wages and retain staff into the future. With the increasing demand for mental health services for both adults and children, it will be impossible for us to provide critical services for treatment and recovery if we are unable to secure the appropriate staffing. After decades of underfunding, we have reached a workforce shortage that has been elevated to a crisis level. It is essential that we address this disparity now for the future of all non-profits.

Thank you for your consideration.

Jennifer Fiorillo, MBA, MPH
President & CEO- Bridges Healthcare, Inc.